

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

What Does It Mean to Weep With Those Who Weep?

by Kevin DeYoung

Romans 12:15 is a divine command and a vital aspect of Christian maturity. As God’s holy people (Rom. 12:1), Christians are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. In recent years, the second half of the verse in particular has been emphasized as a key component in caring for victims, in listening to the stories of the oppressed, and in showing compassion to the hurting.

These emphases are right and proper. Oftentimes the first thing we must do with sufferers is simply come alongside them, acknowledge their pain, express our condolences, and assure them of our love and prayers. Many of us can testify firsthand that when we look back at seasons of intense grief, we don’t remember the exact words people shared, but we do remember the people who showed up and sat with us in our tears. I love what Romans 12:15 teaches about Christian compassion and pastoral care. The verse is a needed reminder for any of us who may be tempted to treat suffering with indifference or to approach hurting saints as broken people in need of a quick fix.

“Weep with those who weep” is an important, biblical command. But it should not be taken as a one-size-fits-all formula that demands a rigid application in every situation where people are sad or distraught. Surely, the second half of Romans 12:15 does not mean that the only response to grieving people is to grieve with them. Diving into facts, pursuing objectivity, listening to all sides—these are not invalidated by Romans 12:15. “Weep with those who weep” does not dictate that the reasons for our weeping can never be mistaken. In short, the verse must mean something like “weep with those who have good, biblical reason to be weeping.”

If that sounds like an unnecessary neutering of a beloved verse, consider three observations.

One, almost everyone interprets the first half of Romans 12:15 along the lines just stated above. That is, no one thinks God wants us to rejoice with those who rejoice over the Taliban coming to power. No matter how genuine the rejoicing may be, Christians should not join with those who celebrate abortion or parade their sexual immorality or delight in racial prejudice. Instinctively, we know that the first half of Romans 12:15 means something like, “rejoice with those who have good, biblical reason to be rejoicing.”

Two, a rigid application of Romans 12:15 is untenable in real life. The point of the verse is not to train our emotions to match every emotion we encounter, but rather to be a thoughtful, considerate person who doesn’t sing a dirge at a wedding or bring a kazoo to a funeral. I remember after the 2016 presidential election hearing some disappointed Christians say that other Christians were obliged to weep with them as they grieved the

outcome of the election. Romans 12:15, it was said, commanded others to share in their sorrow. But of course, on that application, Christians were *also* obligated to celebrate with those who cheered the results of the election. The verse cuts in both directions. A reasonable application of Romans 12:15 does not insist on being as sad as the saddest person in our lives, but in being considerate to others who feel differently about disputable matters or are going through different experiences than we are.

Three, strictly speaking, Jesus did not always weep with those who wept. He certainly didn't feel obligated under every circumstance to match the mood of those around him. When the crowds were rejoicing on Palm Sunday, Jesus wept (Luke 20:41), and when the women were mourning for Jesus on his way to the cross, he told them not to weep for him (23:28). Jesus was always kind, but almost never sentimental. To those brokenhearted over their sin or looking to him for deliverance from their suffering, his tenderness knew no end. But to those grieving the puncturing of their pretensions or indignant because of the truth he proclaimed, Jesus could be unsparing in speaking what they did not want to hear.

What, then, does it mean to weep with those who weep?

For starters, we should remember that others may not feel the same way at any given moment, or in response to the same events, as we do. If one mother's son just got accepted to his dream school, while another mother's son has been turned down every place he's applied, the Apostle Paul would have the sad mother be happy for her friend and vice versa. Love is not rude, which means obnoxiously mismatching the mood of those around you is inconsiderate at best, and a sin at worst.

But more than that, Romans 12:15 is fundamentally about maintaining the warmth and unity of Christian fellowship. That's why verse 15 is followed by commands like "live at harmony with one another" (v. 16), "do not be haughty" (v. 16), "do what is honorable," (v. 17), and "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (v. 18). Raining on parades and dancing at gravesides does not help keep the peace.

Be thoughtful. Be compassionate. Be quick to lend a helping hand or a shoulder to cry on. Christians look to comfort the sad.

But our sympathy is not untethered to all other considerations. Weeping in itself is not sacrosanct. The one who laughs the loudest is not always laughing for good reason. Likewise, the one who shares most conspicuously his pain is not always lamenting for good cause. Our suffering is not sovereign.

Romans 12:15 is a precious verse meant to provide pastoral wisdom in the church and inject personal sensitivity into our relationships. We honor the verse by obeying what it means to command, not by insisting on what is impractically one-sided, out of step with the context, and inconsistent with the example of Jesus.